

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Too tight to mention

David Robinson has a reputation for being as tight as a gnat's proverbials, but it's not his fault – he's just spent too much time with misers such as Bob the Builder

Not far from us is one of the country's leading agricultural colleges. The son of a well-to-do farmer was sent there to learn to do what farmers do but, instead of studying, he spent the first term drinking and womanising, as young male students are often wont to do. He returned home at the end of the first term clutching a report documenting his abysmal academic achievement. However, although he was lazy, he was far from thick. He explained to his angry father, "Dad, it's like this. The problem's either genetic or environmental."

I'm using the same environmental excuse to account for my propensity for not dispersing cash. With customers such as mine, who could make Scrooge or Arkwright look like spendthrifts, some of it is bound to rub off.

CAN WE FIX IT?

The other day, I was reviewing the support contract renewal schedule with Mrs R when I came upon a default entry for Bob the Builder – not the cartoon one, but a guy we did a system for in 1991. He does specialist work for chain stores and needed some non-standard job-costing software to cope with the quirks of his business (not least, the quirky accountant). The system ran under UNIX. In those days, if you wanted something reliable and multi-user, UNIX was the only choice. We had one system that went 21 months without a reboot. And before you ask, it was switched on. You were lucky if Windows 3.1 went a few hours before you saw the dreaded blue screen of death, and were left praying that your data had survived the crash. Then there was Windows NT 3.5 (was there ever a 3.0?), but we'd best not go down that route – the memories are too painful.

Anyway, we stopped charging Bob for maintenance around 2001 on the basis that if the system broke there was as much chance of getting hold of the right spares as Effing Jeff joining the priesthood. And if we can't guarantee we'll be able to fix things, it's not fair to charge and pretend that you can,



then hope and pray that it doesn't go wrong. "Is Bob still using that?" asked Mrs R. "Dunno," I said.

IF IT AIN'T BROKE

I rang him to find out – and indeed, this dinosaur of a system was still running like something horrible that had escaped from the past through a Primeval Anomaly. "Have you thought about replacing it?" "No need," he replied, in a tone implying I was some kind of profligate maniac. "There's nowt wrong wi' it." I ran through the list of possible terminal (pardon the pun) failures: motherboard, memory, hard disk, multi-port serial card, power supply and backup device.

"Oh, that," said Bob, when I mentioned the backup device. "That's gone west, but the computer still works." He apparently tracked down another backup drive the same as the broken one on eBay (it only cost a tenner), but Sid the Storeman who "knows about computers" hadn't fitted it yet. It seems Sid knows so much about computers that he thinks it's a good bet to leave a 17-year-old system without a backup for two months.

I suggested that the whole thing was running on borrowed time. Imagine if the hard disk heads and platters collided – a common cause of mortality in drives of that vintage. This must be a statistical freak to be still running at all. The consequences could be dire:

- No-one would know how much the company was owed, or owed to

other people, leading to cashflow problems and disrupted supplies

- No-one would know what the current contract costs were
- The Inland Revenue and Customs would have a field day estimating tax and VAT liabilities.

The cost of sorting out the mess would be horrendous.

"Well, if you want to look at it that way," said Bob, conceding that I might have a reason for relieving him of some cash. He suggested that I visit the following week to talk to Creepy Ted, the accountant. I remembered Creepy Ted from 17 years ago. A grey, cadaverous man with the limpest handshake you can imagine. It was like grasping a dead cod. God knows what it's like now. I'm amazed he's still working.

IN FROM THE COLD

I visited Bob's place the following week, on the coldest day of the year. A hot coffee to kill the chill? Fat chance. I felt even colder after being 'greeted' by Ted, who now looks about 103.

We started by discussing the current system and the folly of not having a backup. He promised to shake Sid from his stupor that very day. Moving on to the requirements for the new system, he proudly informed me that it needn't 'do' email. They already had a system for that whereby everybody in the office shared a common PC that was sitting in the corner.

I told him that I thought he needed a small file server plus a PC

to replace each of the ageing Wyse 120 'dumb' terminals. "Won't they work with the new system, then?" asked Ted, eyeing me with some suspicion lest I get him to buy something unnecessary.

Then we moved on to software. Word processing? Got that, on the shared PC. Excel? "What does that do? No, I don't think we need that." Internet? On the shared PC. They'd even changed to broadband when they'd sussed it was cheaper than paying phone connection charges. Did I want to take a modem in part exchange? "Er, no thanks."

I showed him some modern accounting software with integrated customer relationship management (CRM) features, which are great for tracking customer service issues, and who should be dealing with them. No, didn't want that, either. The works manager records that using WordPad – on the shared PC, of course.

QUOTE, UNQUOTE

I'd checked with Mrs R and it is possible – though not advisable – to run old UNIX programs under Windows Server 2003 after a recompile. But do I offer him the option of sticking with something that is dated but could, with a rewrite, be easier to use? At a higher cost, of course. Still, what the eye doesn't see, and all that.

I knocked up a quick quote for a simple server with a backup device ("What! Can't we use the one Sid's just got?") and a rewrite for the application plus data translation. It'll take me at least a day to work out how to get the old UNIX box to transmit the data to anything we can work with now. Hopefully a serial connection and FTP will work.

But Ted's aghast at the figure. The fact that the bill is less than the original system cost in 1991 is lost on him. "Don't know whether I can get Bob to pay that much," he said glumly. "How much is the old system worth second-hand?" **CS**

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